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Details

Lecture Genres of the Old Testament, Week 3
Series: MMMM_Bible, First Baptist Church, 25FA
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Bibliography

- Coogan, Michael D. *The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction*.
- Davies, Philip R. "Apocalyptic." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*
- Dell, Katharine J. "Wisdom." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*
- Gruen, Erich S. "Novella." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*
- Rooke, Deborah W. "Prophecy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*
- Wenham, Gordon J. "Law in the Old Testament." In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studiesp*

Lecture Outline

1. Why **Genre Matters**: Learning from Movies
    1. Different movies require different expectations - you wouldn't watch Lord of the Rings like you would Blues Brothers
        1. Comedy films expect you to laugh at silly situations and characters
        2. Fantasy epics expect you to believe in magical worlds and heroic quests
        3. Historical dramas expect you to learn about past events and people
    2. Reading the Bible wrong because of genre confusion creates "translation errors" and problems
        1. Treating poetry like historical reporting misses the emotional and spiritual message
        2. Reading parables as literal events misses the deeper teaching point
        3. Expecting scientific precision from ancient creation stories misses their theological meaning
2. **Discussion** - Personal Stories: *how Genre Confusion Affects Real People*
    1. Some of us shared experiences with fundamentalist upbringing and literal Bible interpretation
        1. Learning about flood myths in other cultures challenged young earth creationism beliefs
        2. Being told that not taking the Bible literally would result in going to hell
        3. Parents buying creation science materials when speakers came to church
    2. *Left Behind* books taught as actual prophecy rather than fiction shows how genre confusion can be harmful
        1. Children raised to believe these novels represented future reality rather than speculation
        2. Some of us developed *anxiety* about being "left behind" during the rapture

    3. Demonstrates how recent theological innovations (rapture doctrine only 150 years old) get treated as ancient truth

3. **Wisdom Literature**: *Two Sides of Life Experience*
    1. **Positive wisdom** (like Proverbs) gives advice for *when life makes sense and God seems in control*
        1. *Practical* sayings about work, relationships, money, and decision-making
        2. Assumes that good choices generally lead to good outcomes
        3. Provides *guidance for building* stable communities and personal character
    2. **Negative wisdom** (like Job and Ecclesiastes) helps cope when *life is terrible and God seems absent*
        1. Job challenges the idea that suffering always results from personal wrongdoing
        2. Ecclesiastes *accepts uncertainty* and finds meaning in simple human pleasures
        3. Both books wrestle with the theological problem of *why bad things happen to good people*
4. **Prophecy**: *Social Commentary, not Fortune Telling*
    1. Popular misunderstanding treats prophecy like predicting the future or "videotape of what's going to happen"
    2. Actual biblical prophecy *addresses specific social problems and warns about consequences* of injustice
        1. Some prophets focus on *social justice* issues (especially Amos and Micah condemning treatment of poor)
        2. Other prophets emphasize *religious problems* (idolatrous worship, breaking covenant with God)
        3. Many prophetic books also contain substantial *hope and restoration promises*, not just warnings
    3. Prophecy serves multiple *functions in crisis situations*
        1. Explains *disasters as consequences of societal choices* rather than random events
        2. Maintains *belief in God's justice* even when circumstances seem to contradict it
        3. Offers *hope for future restoration* after periods of judgment and exile
5. **Myth**: *Stories that Fill the World with Meaning*
    1. *Everyone has myths whether they realize it or not* - even reading science books creates stories about what humans are
        1. Secular worldviews function as organizing narratives just like religious ones
        2. Modern people still need stories to make sense of existence and purpose
        3. Scientific paradigms themselves operate through story-like frameworks about reality
    2. Biblical myths *fill our worlds with meaning*, asking whether you see a mountain as "pile of minerals to sell" or "beautiful creation of God"
        1. Creation stories transform older narratives to present *humans as God's image* rather than demon blood
        2. Flood narratives emphasize *divine justice and human responsibility* rather than arbitrary divine violence
        3. These *stories compete with empire* narratives that justify violence and exploitation
6. **Torah and History**: *How Israel's Stories Were Built from Multiple Traditions*
    1. **"God collapse"** - when different groups merged, their gods had to merge too

    1. YHWH was the storm god from the southern Canaanite hills
    2. El was the wise, fatherly creator god from the northern trade city of Ugarit
    3. When these groups became one people, they had to combine their divine traditions into unified narratives
2. What happened to the other gods in the Canaanite pantheon?
    1. Some got merged into the combined YHWH-El identity (attributes absorbed into monotheism)
    2. Some were destroyed or rejected in the text (like Baal who becomes an opponent)
    3. Some hung around as divine attributes or aspects (like wisdom personified as feminine)
3. **Feminine divine aspects were not completely erased** from the tradition
    1. *Anat* was a warrior goddess who avenged her brother's death ("the most metal of these gods")
    2. *Asherah* was characterized as the spouse or companion of El
    3. Asherah poles mentioned in Old Testament suggest continued memory or worship of her
    4. **Wisdom personified as feminine in Proverbs** - possible holdover from these earlier divine feminine figures
4. **Torah as layered composition** rather than single authorship
    1. Different groups brought different stories, laws, and divine names
    2. Evidence of layering shows up in duplicate stories with different details (like the flood narrative)
    3. Different names for God in different sections (YHWH in some passages, Elohim in others)
    4. Later editors wove traditions together so both sides of the new unified people saw themselves reflected
5. Purpose of merging traditions was creating shared identity
    1. Both groups needed to see their heritage in the sacred texts
    2. Created sense of common history and destiny
    3. Made one people out of formerly separate communities

7. **Novella**: *Historical Fiction with a Purpose*
    1. Books like Esther and Ruth use fantastic elements (like 180-day feasts) to signal they're historical fictions that have *other aims than being a chronicle*.
    2. These stories teach how to survive and thrive when you're powerless under foreign rule
        1. Many function as "*diaspora novels*" - stories for Jews living away from homeland under foreign governments
        2. *Court tales* (like Daniel) show faithful Jews gaining influence and authority in foreign royal courts
        3. Characters demonstrate collaboration with (and strategic subversion of) foreign rulers to maintain their communities vs. overt speaking truth to power or rebellion
    3. Stories address specific challenges of minority communities
        1. How to maintain religious identity while participating in non-Jewish political systems
        2. How to find favor with foreign authorities without compromising core beliefs
        3. How to navigate cultural differences and hostile environments successfully
8. **Law Codes**: *Instructions for Community Life Planned, did not get to this.*
    1. Biblical law isn't just random rules but frameworks for how God's people should live together
        1. **Covenant Code** (Exodus) addresses early agricultural community needs

2. **Holiness Code** (Leviticus) emphasizes ritual purity and sacred practices
3. **Deuteronomic Code** (Deuteronomy) provides updated guidelines for settled monarchy period

2. Different law collections (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy) address different historical situations and community needs
    1. Laws *supplement rather than replace* customary legal practices
    2. Many laws *protect vulnerable populations* (widows, orphans, foreigners)
    3. Legal frameworks *establish* covenant relationship *obligations between God and people*

Table of Genres

Major Old Testament Genres Overview

Genre	Shorthand	Examples in Old Testament	Key Idea
Wisdom	Making sense of and coping with life. Major themse are prosperity and the bleak.	- Proverbs - Job - Ecclesiastes	Positive - when God seems in control Negative - when it seems like God is not in control
Prophecy	God warns peoples to get their acts together or suffer the (natural) consequences.	- Isaiah - Jeremiah - Ezekiel - The Twelve	Usually *conditional*. Rarely about the far future.
Law Codes	Instruction for community life and relationship with the Divine.	- Covenant Code (Exodus) - Holiness Code (Leviticus) - Deuteronomic Code	Framework for covenant relationship between God and people
Novella	Fantastic history-adjacent stories that teach how to cope, often from below.	- Ruth - Esther - Daniel 1-6	Entertainment and instruction through engaging stories
History	Narrative accounts of Israel's past that *construct* who Israel is in the *present*	- Joshua - Judges - Samuel - Kings	Adapting past stories to (re)constitute a people.
Apocalypse	Wisdom lacking a divine patron. - Why do we suffer even when we are holy? - Does God honor God's promises?	- Daniel 7-12	Expression of suffering. Expression of faith. Passive vs. Agent.